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RUCPDOG/USDOC WASHINGTON DC

C O N F I D E N T I A L BUENOS AIRES 001046

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WHA FOR WHA/BSC AND WHA/EPSC
E FOR THOMAS PIERCE,
EB/TRA FOR TOM ENGLE, TOM COLMENA
FOR USMISSION TO ICAO
FAA FOR CECILIA CAPESTANY, KRISTA BERQUIST
TRANSPORTATION FOR BRIAN HEDBERG
FAA MIAMI FOR MAYTE ASHBY
PASS NSC FOR JOSE CARDENAS
USDOC FOR ALEXANDER PEACHER AND JOHN ANDERSEN
TREASURY FOR LTRAN
USCINCSO FOR POLAD

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TAGS: [ECON](#) [FAIR](#) [AR](#)
SUBJECT: ARGENTINA: CIVAIR TURBULENCE ON THE GROUND

REF: BUENOS AIRES 518

Classified By: Ambassador E.A. Wayne. Reasons 1.5 (b,d)

[¶1](#). (C) SUMMARY: Argentina has been seized recently with media stories alleging unsafe skies and a "broken" civil aviation regime, with some analysts and pilot and controller groups weighing in to support this charge. What began with a March 1 electrical storm that knocked out the primary radar serving the two major metropolitan Buenos Aires airports, has been fueled with more stories alleging near misses, non-functioning radars and increased delays, all pointing towards the conclusion that the skies are not safe. Although Post has no role or expertise in assessing aviation safety, our discussions with a wide array of aviation experts and officials strongly contradict this media portrayal. The technical competence of Argentine pilots, controllers and other aviation professionals, and overall aviation infrastructure and oversight are rated among the best in South America.

[¶2](#). (C) During the several week period when the damaged radar was not fully functioning, airport authorities reverted to a slower, manual mode for air traffic control, which resulted in highly publicized delays. The radars are now functioning again, but for extra safety, authorities are maintaining slower control protocols nonetheless. At the same time, local media have linked flight delays to other lingering domestic civil aviation concerns, including regular airline and traffic controller slowdowns and strikes, Ministry of

Defense budgetary woes and low salaries for its civil aviation personnel, unconfirmed near misses, a recent fatal military aircraft accident, and ongoing controversies over high prices and poor services by airport service providers. All of this is playing out against the backdrop of an election year, and a behind-the-scenes struggle for the future shape of Argentina's civil aviation regime, as the GOA slowly tackles the politically charged task of transitioning civil aviation from the military to civilian control. In this situation, the scare stories have taken on a life of their own, and the public is left with the perception that flying in Argentina is unsafe. END SUMMARY.

March 1 storm damaged primary radar - causing delays

13. (C) Since a March 1 electrical storm that knocked out the primary radar serving the two major airports in Buenos Aires (Ezeiza International airport and the domestic Aeroparque), the media and some pilot and controller groups have promoted the idea that Argentina has unsafe skies and a "broken" aviation regime. The international (including U.S.) media has also picked up on this issue. For several weeks thereafter, controllers used a "manual mode" to oversee landings and take-offs, which is a common and perceived safe workaround, but which also causes delays. Instead of using radars to space traffic, in a tighter time sequence of about 2-3 minutes between events, controllers reverted to oversight in longer intervals of about 10 minutes. According to a wide range of Embassy contacts, including U.S. carrier country managers, the manual system of control that is still in place has no/no impact on safety at all. However, it has caused

longer delays, which in turn fueled public outrage and the perception that safety is impacted. (Note: Also according to contacts, the radars that the airports used were not the latest models or the highest quality in the first place, but were quite adequate. These delays have had a serious financial impact on U.S. carriers, who have had to pay higher airport parking fees, and have experienced missed U.S.-based follow-on flights. End note.) Several weeks ago, the radars were restored to their former status, and are now functioning, we are told.

Other bad aviation news, all at once

14. (C) Adding fuel to the fire have been flare-ups of other longer standing civil aviation sector problems, including frequent air transport slowdowns and strikes over salary and benefit issues (always popular in a pre-election years), Ministry of Defense (which controls civil aviation) budget problems, and persistent controversies over alleged high prices and poor services provided by privatized airport service providers. Newer problems surfacing include the recent crash of a military jet and the death of its pilot, unconfirmed stories of near misses due to overburdened controllers, and the leak of a letter from the FAA to the GOA expressing concern on unrelated aviation safety issues. In the last few weeks, local and international media have widely reported on these alleged near misses of flights, although Post has been unable to verify that they have occurred. In the case of one such reported near miss, the involved U.S. carrier strongly denied this. There is strong suspicion by U.S. airline country managers that these stories are planted by those alleging unsafe skies. Unfortunately, the combative relationship among and between pilots, controllers, GOA, MOD, and press has increased the tension.

Radars back to normal, but controllers want to
milk this problem further - a Perfect Excuse?

15. (C) Despite restoring the radars to their original

condition prior to the March 1 storm, airport authorities and controllers have continued on the "manual mode" of control, which causes continued delays. Post's contacts point out that this is a political decision, and allege that air traffic controllers have been instituting a deliberate slow-down procedure in an attempt to exaggerate the challenges, and improve their chances for higher pay, better conditions and better positions in a future civilian organization. The GOA has reportedly arranged to acquire two back-up used radars from Spain, but Post does not know exactly when they will be delivered, or how useful they will be.

Jockeying for power and money in a future civil aviation regime

16. (SBU) As reported reftel, the GOA's March 15 announcement to transition control of civil aviation from the military to

the Ministry of Transport was essentially a political gesture, during an election year, to demonstrate that the GOA is taking action in light of current aviation problems. A full transition will likely take several years. At present, there is no staff, budget or legal authority for this transition. The decree announcing this transition actually just established a commission to start studying this transition.

17. (C) The prospect of a transition has unleashed a struggle among some employees of the current civil aviation regime, the Air Regions Command (CRA, under the Ministry of Defense), as well as prospective employees and prospective union leaders of a future civil aviation authority. Observers widely note that a new civil aviation organization would be a major source of political patronage for government leaders, and a good source of well-paying employment for the politically connected. The CRA has about 8,500 employees nationwide, of which about 70-80% are uniformed personnel. Of this total, there are about 900 air traffic controllers. Since the GOA announcement of plans to transition control, morale among current ARC employees has plummeted, as they have no clear idea about future employment under the Ministry of Transport: Will they lose their jobs, be retired, or allowed to work in the new regime, and at what salary? Also, current controllers, mostly uniformed personnel and receiving a comparatively low salary, fear the prospect of much higher salaries for civilian employees likely with much less training - who would replace them.

18. (C) Although the vast majority of CRA employees are said to be doing their job as before in a professional manner, a few "troublemakers" (in the words of several GOA and U.S. carrier reps) have acted up. In the case of the more sensitive area of air traffic controllers, there are said to be about 14 to 16 leaders who are leading slowdowns, causing increased inconvenience, and fear. Post has been told that the MOD and the controllers have been locked in a bitter dispute over which of these "troublemakers" would be transferred and who allowed back. Also worrying for the industry is the fact that air traffic controllers under the Ministry of Transport will presumably be able to strike, a 'right' that is not allowed under the MOD, in a society with a high incidence of strikes, and with very powerful unions. (Note: In a clear nod to these problems, the MOD yesterday announced monthly payraises for its controllers, ranging from about \$195 to \$325. End note.)

Comment

19. (C) Embassy Buenos Aires has no role or expertise in assessing aviation safety. We can only report what we are told by local 'experts.' There are strong indications that political struggles underpin allegations of unsafe skies in

Argentina as controllers, prospective employees and unions begin to draw lines in a future battle to control a civilianized civil aviation regime here. Every public or private aviation industry observer with whom Post has spoken has indicated that despite the media stories, temporary radar problems and delays, air safety has so far not been impacted.

End Comment.

WAYNE